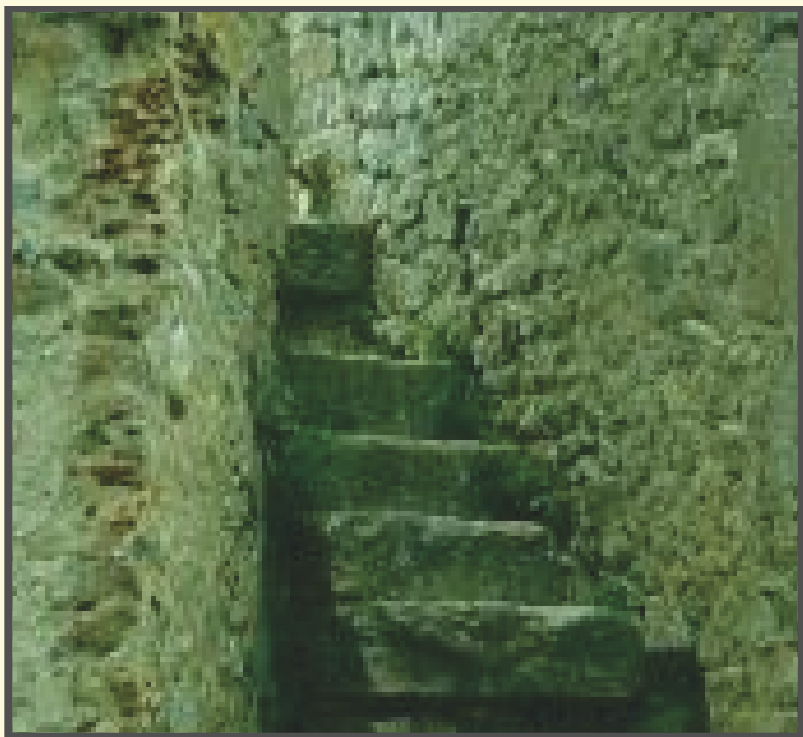


# تهذيب أخلاقنا



## Refining Our Character

*Notes for a talk given by:*

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*at*

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WA LA-DhIKRU-LLĀHI AKBAR

and the remembrance of Allāh is the greatest!  
(Sūrah al-Aʿnabūtt 29:45)



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بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ

قَدْ أَفْلَحَ مَنْ زَكَّاهَا • وَقَدْ خَابَ مَنْ دَسَّاهَا

qadā °aflaḥa man zakkāhā • wa qadā khāba man dassāhā  
 successful is the one who purifies it  
 and failed is the one who buries it in sin.  
 (Sūrah aṣḥ-Ṣhams 91:9-10)

قَدْ أَفْلَحَ مَنْ تَزَكَّى • وَذَكَرَ اسْمَ رَبِّهِ فَصَلَّى  
 بَلْ تُؤْثِرُونَ الْحَيَاةَ الدُّنْيَا • وَالْآخِرَةَ خَيْرٌ وَأَبْقَى •

qadā °aflaḥa man tazakkā • wa dhakara-s-ma rabbiḥi fa-ṣalla  
 bal tu°thirūna-l-ḥayāta-d-dunyā • wa-l-°ākhiratu khayruñw-wa°abāqā  
 Successful is the one who purifies[his soul]  
 and Remembering the Name of His Lord – worships  
 But no – you prefer the life of this world  
 And [yet] the Final World if better and more enduring.  
 (Sūrah al-°A°lā 87:14-17)

وَلَذِكْرُ اللَّهِ أَكْبَرُ ؕ

wa-la-dhikru-llāhi °akbar  
 and the remembrance of Allāh is the greatest!  
 (Sūrah al-Añkabūt 29:45)

The Prophet ﷺ says, “I am like a traveller, who takes a rest under a tree in the shade and then goes on his way.” (Tirmidhī)

Sayyidnā Alī ؑ says, “This world is a place of transit, not a place to stay. The people here are of two categories. One is the man who sold himself [to his passions] and other is a man who purchased his self [by controlling his passions] and freed his self.”

The difference between the worldly and the Final Worlders does not consist in their being rich or poor, involved in worldly affairs or being without a job, being social or living an aescetic life, holding worldly position or not, being a business man or a religious scholar. The difference has to do with their focus or attachment.

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It is a matter of where one places one's attention — on Allāh ﷻ or on the dunyā. This again is why I put so much stress on the bay'ah (بَيْعَة). The question remains: to whom will you sell (*bay'ah*) your self? To Allāh ﷻ or to the dunyā (دُنْيَا)?

In terms of the refinement of character this is the very first question which must be answered.

Every thing which keeps a human being occupied with its' self (*nafs*) and prevents that person from the Remembrance (*dhikr*) of Allāh ﷻ and those actions and activities related to the Final World is, in the end, feeding a person of dunyā. Acquiring an education, teaching, writing, being a caller or an 'imām; even living an ascetic life and being continuously engaged in worship (*'ibadah*) — if it is done for the sake of other than Allāh ﷻ it is, in the end, working for your self in the dunyā and your rewards will always be the rewards of the *dunyā* and not those of the *'ākhirah*.

Those people who are attached to this world and negligent of Allāh ﷻ and the Hereafter are the servants of this world or *'abdudunyā*. Those who are the pure sincere servants of Allāh ﷻ and are totally committed to Him and the Final World and do not have any other goal other than seeking His Pleasure are *'abdullāh*.

قُلْ إِنَّ صَلَاتِي وَنُسُكِي وَمَحْيَايَ وَمَمَاتِي لِلَّهِ رَبِّ الْعَالَمِينَ

qul 'inna ṣalātī wa nusukī wa maḥyāya wa mamātī  
li-llāhi rabbi-l-*'ālamīn*

Say, “Truly my worship and my sacrifice  
and my living and my dying  
are for Allāh, the Lord of All the Worlds.  
(Sūrah al-*'An'ām* 6:162)

Just as people gain positions in this world, so do they gain position and standing in the *'ākhirah*. The degree of worldliness of each one depends on the extent of their attachment to the world and away from proximity (*qurb*) to Allāh ﷻ, and as much as one is busy with the *Dhikr* and the *'ākhirah* so too is their position with Allāh ﷻ. To begin to refine yourself you must know the goal of your life.

أَرْضَيْتُمْ بِالْحَيَاةِ الدُّنْيَا مِنَ الْآخِرَةِ  
فَمَا مَتَاعُ الْحَيَاةِ الدُّنْيَا فِي الْآخِرَةِ إِلَّا قَلِيلٌ

aradītum bi-l-ḥayāti-d-dunyā mina-l-°ākḥira?

famā matā°u-l-ḥayāti-d-dunyā fi-l-°ākḥirati °illa qalīl

Are you more satisfied with the life of the world than the Final World?

But what is the pleasure of the life of the world

[compared] to the Final Life, save a little?

(Sūrah at-Tawbah 9:38)

It is important to remember here that it is not the world that is being reproached, for it too is the creation of Allāh ﷻ, but rather it is the attachments to the transient realm and becoming negligent about the Eternal Life.

Being a Muslim requires of people that they should discover the reality, essence and nature of this world the way it actually is. Whoever really discovers the nature of this world will never become infatuated or lose their heart for its sake. Neither will they be deceived by its power, its wealth and various allurements, nor will they become the slaves and prisoners of this world.

Coming to clarity on this issue therefore is step number one in the refining of one's character. You must make the decision once and for all, who and what you are for.

Let us say that you have made this decision for your self; what then is the next step?

The true next step is to seek guidance from one who has been guided. Yes, it is possible at some level to make your way, but it is like walking through a mine field or trying to get from one city to another without a map or a GPS device, or sailing a ship from one land to another without the help of a navigator. Yes, again, it is possible, but many ships have been lost and many souls have drowned in the ocean. One must get on the Ship of Safety if one is to reach the further shore with safety and, as the Prophet ﷺ said, “*Inna-l-Ḥusayn Misbah al-Huda wa Safinat an-Najah*”.

In the world in which we live it means that one must find a Guide, find an Explosives Expert, a Navigator, someone who knows where the explosives are in the mine field, someone who knows how to get from one city to another, somebody who knows how to sail the ship safely (سفينة النجاة) for, as I have said, many ships are lost at sea and many are the souls who have drowned.

Functionally this means that one must find the person capable of guiding them. Bay<sup>°</sup>ah does not exist in a vacuum. There must be someone to take and witness the bay<sup>°</sup>ah, otherwise there is no sale.

Whether you call such a person a ṣhaykh or a murshid or a pīr makes no difference. They are all names for the same thing, which is a human being connected back to the Prophet ﷺ who has both written and signed °ijazāt and °idhīn from his own ṣhaykh (murshid or pīr) to guide other people, and that ṣhaykh must in turn be connected to his ṣhaykh and so on all the way up the line to the Prophet ﷺ. There are some people who profess to be Uwyasi, and that is a possibility, but it can sometimes be problematic in somewhat the same way that going to a plumber for a heart operation can be problematic. Whilst it is true that plumbers do deal with valves and pipes etc., a surgeon who has a degree on the wall of his office that attests to the fact that he is a heart surgeon duly recongnized by the Medical Board of Examiners is by far a safer and wiser decision.

For those who question the provenance of such an understanding, please consider the following °āyāt and understand the pivotal role it played in the life of the Rasūl ﷺ.

إِنَّ الَّذِينَ يَبَايِعُونَكَ إِنَّمَا يُبَايِعُونَ اللَّهَ يَدُ اللَّهِ فَوْقَ أَيْدِيهِمْ  
فَمَنْ نَكَثَ فَإِنَّمَا يَنْكُثُ عَلَى نَفْسِهِ  
وَمَنْ أَوْفَى بِمَا عَاهَدَ عَلَيْهِ اللَّهُ فَمَسْئُوتِيهِ أَجْرًا عَظِيمًا

°inna-l-ladhīna yubāyi°ūnaka °innamā yubāyi°ūna-llāh  
yadu-llāhi fowka °aydīhim

fa-man nakathā fa-°innamā yankuthu °ala nafsih

wa man °owfā bi-mā °āhada °alayhu-llāha fasayū°tīhi °ajāran °aḍhīmā

## Refining our Character

Truly those who swear allegiance to you swear allegiance to Allāh;  
the Hand of Allāh is above their hands.

The one who breaks [the oath] only breaks it to the loss of his self.

Whoever keeps his oath with Allāh,  
upon him shall be [bestowed] an immense reward.

(Sūratu-l-Faḥ 48:10)

*and very importantly*

“Whoever dies without the bay<sup>ʿ</sup>ah on his neck  
dies the death of the Jahiliyyah!”

(Reported by Muslim in his Saḥīḥ)

So with all this in mind and heart – and remember that our pious ancestors (*as-salaf*) used to travel hundreds if not thousands of miles seeking one ḥadīth – in our time we seek to find or seek to be found by one who has his hand in the hand of the one who has his hand in the one who has his hand...in the hand of the Rasūl ﷺ.

Now I realise that there are many who may be listening (or reading) who are somewhat or very skeptical about tassawuf and shaykh's and all that seems to go along with that and, especially today, seem to be more acively drawn to the more fiqh dimensions of the path, as for instance this quote from “*sunnipath*” suggests:

“In theory, Tasawwuf sounds really good. But seeing how there are so many wrongs going on in Tasawwuf nowadays, many people are rightfully turned off by it.

“What is needed is Tazkiyah and reformation and that is not restricted to the current day Tasawwuf and neither is Tazkiyah guaranteed in the current form of Tasawwuf.

“Millions of people across the world throughout the many centuries and till [*sic*] today have deviated and have involved themselves in Shirk because of Tasawwuf as compared to Fiqh.”

To which someone posted back:

And there are no wrongs going on in fiqh? Jurisprudence is the most hotly debated issue in the muslim world, over which people are expelled from Islam, banished from masaajid, and over which enmity is bred.

Yes, there are many who claim to represent tasawwuf today, as with anything else ... The issue is, as you mentioned, tazkiyya and reformation of an individual.

And that really is the issue—purification and reformation of the self.

So the individual will have to make their own decision as to the right way to go but, in truth, it comes down to finding someone who knows a lot more than you do, and if that person is an ‘alim making sure that the person is from the *‘ulemā mutaqqi’īn*, or, if from the ‘awliyā karam, to be sure that such a person is from the ‘awliyā ṣaddiqqīn, lest you find yourself some day lost at sea.

Shaykh Nūh Ha Mīm wrote in one of his teaching essays, “The Sufi path is not a way of words but of work. Its aim is to change one’s soul and life to conform to the Divine. The strongest means for this change are dhikr or ‘remembrance of Allah,’ mudhakara or learning from one’s sheikh, and jihad al-nafs or overcoming the self. If one is doing these things, one is travelling the path. If one is not, one has stopped.”

My own shaykh, Dr. Ibrahīm Muḥammad al-Battawī ﷺ, who taught at al-Azhar for some twenty-five years, mainly from the *Ihyā* and mainly to ‘foreign’ students, always used to tell us that Allāh ﷻ in His Infinite Kindness (*innayāt*) has given us, and indeed, all Muslims, what they needed to perfect themselves in the clearest and most obvious of forms. That Allāh ﷻ had placed in front of us the entire program whereby we could purify and reform our selves.

This program began with, first of all, dhikr, for it is first of all necessary to Remember Allāh which is why Allāh ﷻ says, “*adh-dhikru-llāh ‘akbar*’ or “The Remembrance of Allāh is the Greatest” for, as he made clear, without the Remembrance (*dhikr*) of Allāh ﷻ there is no Place to begin and no One to start with.

He then would always make clear that whilst the *haylalah* or the repetition of “*lāā ‘illa-llāh*” was efficacious, direct and most widely prescribed, we should pay attention to the first command of Allāh ﷻ to His Prophet ﷺ, which was “*‘Iqra*” or recite or cantillate.

Given this we should, in addition to the *haylalah* which is, in any case, an integral part of our daily Wird al-‘Āmm, make it our practice to recite out loud part of the Qur’ān daily both after Ṣalātu-l-Fajr up to *shurūku-sh-shams* or sunrise and after Ṣalātu-l-‘Ishā’ at night. He himself always recited at least a *Jūz* every day.



The benefits of this, he said, were incalculable both in this world and the next and included many health-related benefits as well, due to the sounds that were produced in the body, which had a definite and pronounced effect on the internal subtle organs (*laṭāʾif*). His teaching on this led me to my own understanding of what I call “Sonic Theology”. He further developed these teachings, which I stress are not intellectual but actual, in the *Ḥadrah* especially with the prolongation of certain sounds found in *ʾal-ʾāsmāʾ Allāh al-ḥusnā* of Allāh (الْأَسْمَاءُ الْحُسْنَى). For instance *fatha*, *dammah* and *kasrah* have respectively direct effects on the subtle centers of the heart, the throat and the pineal gland, which in turn aid the reciters to develop their compassion, increase their ability to communicate clearly, and to see objectively and make wise decisions.

All of this I would include under the rubric of refining the character.

Beyond and beneath (or above) all of this is the whole dimension of the *ṣalāt*, based especially on the saying of the Prophet ﷺ:

“If a person had a stream in front of their house and bathed in it five times a day they would be clean.” This also leads, especially in light of the *ʾIḥyā*, to the deeper understanding of the *wūḍūʾ* (الوضوء).

One of the great things about the teachings contained in the *ʾIḥyā* is that they force one beyond mere ritual observance.

In this I refer to the teaching of Shāykh Muḥammad an-Ninowy who speaks of the situation of seeing a line of people in *ṣalāt* who obviously are all in accord with the orders of Allāh ﷻ in terms of their obedience to what is ordered, but then he questions, as all of us must because we are all aware of what he is speaking, that although the bodies are obedient, yet so often the minds and the hearts are not. For as we stand in prayer in our obedience to the orders of Allāh ﷻ and the Sunnah of His Prophet ﷺ, at the same time so very often our minds and our hearts wander and are involved in stray thoughts and petty considerations. So whilst outwardly we are observant, inwardly we deviate or, at the very least, are forgetful (*ghaflah*) of where we are and what we are doing in truth. Our bodies may be on the line but our hearts and minds are elsewhere.

يَا أَيُّهَا الَّذِينَ آمَنُوا إِذَا قُمْتُمْ إِلَى الصَّلَاةِ فَاغْسِلُوا  
وُجُوهَكُمْ وَأَيْدِيَكُمْ إِلَى الْمَرَافِقِ  
وَامْسَحُوا بِرُءُوسِكُمْ وَأَرْجُلَكُمْ إِلَى الْكَعْبَيْنِ

yāā °ayyuhā-l-ladhīna °amanū °idhā quñtum °ila-ş-şalāta fa-ghsilū  
wujūhakum wa aydiyakum °ila-l-marā°fiqi  
wa -m-saḥū biru°ūsikum wa arjulakum °ila-l-ka°bayn

Oh you who believe, when you rise up for *ṣalāt* wash  
your faces and hands up to the elbows  
and wipe your heads and your feet up to the ankles

(Sūrah al-Māa°idah 5:7)

and

Jabir °ibn °Abdullāh narrated that the Prophet ﷺ said, “The key to *Jannah* is *ṣalāt* and the key to *ṣalat* is *wuḍū°*”. Tirmidhī and Aḥmad,

Yet the same mindlessness is also true in the *wuḍū°*. Beyond what Allāh ﷻ and His Messenger ﷺ make clear, even a cursory reading of the section of the °Iḥyā shows in depth that the *wuḍū°* is an opportunity for a *cleansing* that goes far beyond washing our face and hands etc., but most of us miss this opportunity for a deep experience of purification time and time again as we all know from our own experience and which can be seen by anybody watching a group of people in the cursory process of making their *wuḍū°*.

Purification has two dimensions in °Islām: one is the purification of water. Then, as Imam Junayd ؒ said, “Purify yourselves with the water of the Unseen” — that is, an inward purification which accompanies the purification of the limbs. *Wuḍū°* is a form of °*ibadā* which takes an equal importance alongside the *ṣalāt* because there is no *ṣalāt* without the *wuḍū°*. *Wuḍū°* is part of the *ṣalāt*. When you start the *wuḍū°* it is of importance that you do not speak to anyone until you have completed the *wuḍū°* because it is the *wuḍū°* which takes you to the *ṣalāt*. Making *wuḍū°* at this level has little to do with the slap dash affair you observe in many masājid today.

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So here we have two very clear means of refining our characters, yet in reality few of us actually manage to do so, which is why I have tried to point to the real necessity of the *shaykh* (murshid or pir).

The Qur'an is there, the Sunnah is there, the deep book on the inner meaning of purification and prayer is there but where are we?

For the very same reason we have said many times that it is impossible to really learn to recite the Qur'an even by listening to the best *Qurrā* (sing. *Qārī* / قَارِي) and loading up on CD's, and DVD's of famous *qurrā* or going on line to listen at their various web sites.

All of these aids may be helpful but they all suffer one major failing, which is they do not and cannot correct us and that is why we need the *shaykh*, because he can do precisely that — correct us.

So while Allāh ﷻ has provided us all with the perfect means, it takes that special person who can show us, teach us, help us to put those means of refining our character into practice.

In my own experience I spent many years trying to find some *body* to teach me how to read Qur'an with tajwīd. Though I studied Arabic and Qur'an reading for many years in Makkah and later in Cairo I was continually frustrated at not really being able to read and, at some level, knowing I really didn't know how to read.

When I finally met my teacher of Qur'an, Ustadh Maḥmud Muḥammad al-Azzīzi, he asked me to read something for him, This is after maybe ten years of assiduously working on my reading and thinking I knew something. I thought I would display my 'skill' by reading Sūrah Ya Sīn for him. I just started out when he quickly stopped me and said. "Look, we will just have to start from the beginning" and we spent one hour on the pronunciation of the letter 'ayn in *‘aḍḥu bi-llāhi min aṣḥ-ṣḥayṭan-i-rajīm*.

When the hour was up he told me this, "The Angel Jibrīl ﷺ taught the Prophet ﷺ to read directly from his mouth to the ear of the Prophet ﷺ and thence to his heart. The Prophet ﷺ would then repeat it back to Jibrīl ﷺ and Jibrīl ﷺ would correct him until he had it right. This is the way it began and this is the way it goes on. If you want to learn this is what you must do. There is no other way."

And this is what we keep returning to in this discussion of refining the character. One person needs the one who knows how because he has himself perfected his character if one wants to know how to perfect one's own character.

As Shaykh Nūh Hā Mīm remarks on this, “The teachings of one's sheikh are the mirror in which one sees oneself and one's progress in the path, and those who leave their house without looking at the mirror often appear strange. In this-worldly matters one should always compare oneself to those less fortunate than oneself.

“But in religious matters—and this is the function of *mudhakara*—[ed. note. *teaching sessions*] one should compare oneself to those above one: the prophets, the sahaba, and the awliya (Allāh bless them one and all).”

So we can say that while Allāh ﷻ has provided the perfect means by which anyone can, at least on the surface of things, refine their character, yet it takes something more or, rather, someone more if one is to refine one's character in truth.

Yes there are the *dhikr*, *qirā'*, the *shahadah*, the *ṣālat*, the *ṣawm*, the *zakāt*, the *hajj*, the *jihad*, the application of *ʿihsān* and *ʿadl* to and in one's daily affairs, all of which do bring about some basic form of refinement for many Muslims everywhere but, truthfully, when we look around we can see, as Muslims, our real situation in our families, in our communities and around the world.

This what must be addressed and, as I understand it, this is the reason the organisers, Jami' al-Karam, have called this meeting.

I have thought deeply about this subject for many years, turning it this way and that way in my heart and mind. This year we conducted a session on “The Necessity of the Shaykh” because, in truth, this is what I have come to understand as being really the only way in which this deep refinement can be accomplished. I do not by this deny the providential means that Allāh ﷻ has provided but when we really grasp that Allāh ﷻ did not simply send down His Revelation but He ﷻ also made sure that there was some one, a human being like, and unlike, us who brought us that Revelation.

In a sense those who deny the the necessity of the Shaykh” are actually denying, even if innocently, the necessity of the Prophet ﷺ.

And here I am not saying, nor do I mean to insuate, that the shaykh is the Prophet ﷺ in any way shape or form, but rather that people need to learn from people. They need to have a living example before their eyes who is involved in their lives as, the Prophet ﷺ was intimately involved in the lives of his family, his companions ﷺ and many members of the larger community of both Makkah and, later, Madīnah the Radiant. As Allāh ﷻ says,

لَقَدْ جَاءَكُمْ رَسُولٌ مِنْ أَنْفُسِكُمْ عَزِيزٌ عَلَيْهِ مَا عَنِتُّمْ  
حَرِيصٌ عَلَيْكُمْ بِالْمُؤْمِنِينَ رَءُوفٌ رَحِيمٌ

laqadā jāʾakum rasūlum-min ʾanfusikum ʿazīzun ʿalayhi ma ʿanitum  
ḥarīṣun ʿalaykum bi-l-muʾminīna raʾūfur-raḥīm

There has come to you a messenger from among yourselves.  
Grevious to him is what you suffer— full of concern for you,  
to the believers kind and compassionate.

(Sūrah at-Tawba 9:128)

This is really the essence of what the shaykh is in his relation to the seeker, the student, the ṭālib, the murīd.

As such the shaykh is in truth the very embodiment of the sunnah of the blessed Prophet ﷺ and if he is really a true shaykh he also embodies, no matter how it may seem, the real essence of the most deep sunnah that was expressed by Allāh ﷻ in His Saying:

وَمَا أَرْسَلْنَاكَ إِلَّا رَحْمَةً لِّلْعَالَمِينَ

wa māā ʾarslanāka ʾillā raḥmatul-l-ʿālamīn

We have not sent you except as *rahmah* (mercy) to all creation  
(Surah al-Ambiyāʾ 21:107)

Admittedly it is not all the shūyukh who reach this deep and exalted position but all of them, somewhere inside of their own selves, aspire to this exalted state.

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This is what they would be, what they most desire to be, if Allāh ﷻ in His Infinite Mercy grants it to them to be that, and if not that at least they are full of concern for you and to the believers kind and compassionate. And beyond that they are capable of actually teaching and deepening the experience of the seekers as they try in their daily lives to fulfill the various commands of Allāh ﷻ.

Of course people ask, ‘How do I know that so and so is not a charlatan, not a fake shaykh who will steal my life and my wealth and take me out on the ship and throw me overboard to the sharks and I will be far worse off than if I had just been content to be a simple compliant Muslim trying to do my daily five and all the rest of it the best way I can even if it is not perfect and even if my character still has a lot of rough edges — at least I am safe?’

For instance consider this posting on the internet: “Let there be no mistake, other shoes will drop, not only on Shaykh So-and-so but a whole host of other “du’aat” and Imams who have with impunity betrayed the trust of the Muslims, and have left us wondering how individuals with such shady and dubious backgrounds were allowed to attain such stature, influence, and respectability in the first place. It is no exaggeration to say, as we shall soon learn, that our community is top heavy with these types of scoundrels, and yet the larger question remains: why did so many responsible and affluent Muslims fork over huge sums of money to a man who spouts the kind of absurd, preposterous, indeed psychotic things that he does?”

I have tried earlier in this talk to offer a few suggestions which are the most reliable that I know.

1) Make sure that whoever it is has ʿijazā and ʿidhīn from a known shaykh with a recognised silsilah and, especially if the shaykh of the shaykh in question is dead, raḥmatullāh ʿalayhi, that the ʿijazā and the ʿidhīn are both signed and witnessed.

2) Make sure the tariqah or branch of the tariqah in question is known and, most importantly, has produced results in those who have studied under its shuyukh. Some of the shuyukh are not really shuyukh of tarbiyya (training) but shuyukh of maintenance.

By this we mean that they may possess the qualities of the shaykh but are not able to teach and train the murīd. They maintain the zawīyya, which was often their father's or a close relative; they carry on the various observances like public dhikr, hadrah, mawālīd and so forth, but in the end they are not truly capable of the kind of rigorous training necessary to produce students of deeply and truly refined character, as can someone like Shaykh ad-Darqawī رحمه الله whose students, many of whom became shuyukh in their own right, have spread across the Muslim world, or Shaykh al-Haddad رحمه الله and especially his work in East Africa, or the Ba 'Alawi shuyukh whose teachings have been so transformative for so many seekers.

3) As the old adage goes, "Observe the shaykh in all his moods." There is no hurry and can be no hurry even though timing is crucial.



We have spoken of some of the requirements of the shaykh, but what of the murīd and his or her requirements? Allāh ﷻ says:

وَمَنْ أَرَادَ الْآخِرَةَ وَسَعَىٰ لَهَا سَعْيَهَا وَهُوَ مُؤْمِنٌ  
فَأُولَٰئِكَ كَانَ سَعْيُهُمْ مَّشْكُورًا

wa man °arāda-l-°ākhirata wa sa°aya lahā sa°yahā wa huwa-mu°min  
fa-°ūla°ika kāna sa°yuhum mashkuran

And whoever desires the Final World  
and strives for it with due effort and is a believer  
he is the one whose striving finds favor [with Allāh]  
(Sūrah al °Isra 17:19)

°Imām al-Ghazalī رحمه الله writes in the *Alchemy of Happiness* (Kimiya as-Sa°adat) concerning the prerequisites of the disciple.

“Know that the reason for someone's not reaching Allāh ﷻ is that he has not travelled on the path. The reason for someone not traveling the path is that he did not seek it. The reason for his not seeking it is that he did not know and his belief (°imān) was incomplete. Indeed the desire for the quest for the provisions of the Final World appears in whoever knows that this world is misery and doesn't last.

“But the Final World is pure and lasts forever. It is not a hardship for him to exchange something without intrinsic value for something of abiding value. Putting down an earthen jug today so that tomorrow one will receive a golden jug is not really difficult.

“The first condition is that one must lift the veil between the self and Allāh ﷻ so as not to be one of those of whom Allāh ﷻ says,

وَجَعَلْنَا مِنْ بَيْنِ أَيْدِيهِمْ سَدًّا وَمِنْ خَلْفِهِمْ سَدًّا  
فَأَغْشَيْنَاهُمْ فَهُمْ لَا يُبْصِرُونَ

wa ja°alnā mim-bayni °aydīhim saddañw-wa min khalfihim saddan  
fa°aghshaynāhum fa-hum lā yubāṣirūn

And we placed a barrier before them and a barrier behind them  
and shrouded them so they do not see.

(Sūrah Yā Sīn 36:9)

“The shrouds [or veils] are four: wealth, rank or status, imitation and sin.

“As for wealth, it is a veil when it engages the heart. The way cannot be travelled save with an unencumbered heart. Wealth must be removed except for that necessary amount which will not weigh one down. If there is someone who has nothing and another takes care of him, his way will be completed more quickly.

“As for the veil of rank, status and pomp, one must rise and flee from them altogether. One must go to a place where one is not known. If one is well known one is always engaged with people and the pleasure [or responsibilities] of their receiving one. Whoever’s pleasure is derived from the people will never reach to Allāh ﷻ.

“As for imitation (*taqlīd*/تَقْلِيد) it is a veil because if one believes exclusively and passionately in a particular school (*madhhab*/مَذْهَب) and hears its words of argument, one gives no place to anything else in his heart. One forgets that one should believe in the full significance of “there is no deity save Allāh” (*lāā °ilaha illallāh*) and that one should first seek the fulfillment of that in one’s self.



“The fulfillment of that is that one has no object of worship which he obeys or hearkens to other than Allāh ﷻ. Whoever is overcome by partisan passion, that passion becomes the object of one’s worship. When this state becomes one’s nature one must uncover it or discover it through greater struggle (*jihad*) not through argument.

“As for sin (*dhamb wa sū*), it is the greatest veil. The heart of whoever perseveres in sin is dark. How can Allāh ﷻ reveal Himself to such a one? Especially [the consuming] of forbidden food, for it annihilates the effect of lawful food on illuminating the heart. In reality one must become fully aware of the forbidden morsel, the tiniest bite, and consume only that which is lawful (*ḥalāl/حلال*).

[It should be understood here that the Shaykh and ʿImām ﷺ is referring not only to food as food itself but everything, which is to say all ‘morsels’ that enter one’s body must be pure (*ḥalāl-حلال*).]

“Finally anyone [who is ensnared in these conditions] and who wishes that the deep myseries of the dīn and its underpinning in law (*شريعة*) be unveiled to him is like the person who wishes to read the Tafsīr (تفسير) of the Qurʾān before he has learned to read Arabic.”

Again, if a person manages to see how they are caught and shrouded in the veils of wealth, rank or status, imitation and sin they are left with the predicament of how to deal with these sicknesses.

How or what does one now do? You might say to your self,

“All right, I know that this thing with money and the kind of position that wealth bestows on a person with money is keeping me from Allāh ﷻ. What can I do to put an end to that or begin to reduce the hold it has on me and the many ways I am trapped in it?”

Or, “Once I understand that my ‘knowledge’ which I attained by years of study, hard work and perseverance has trapped me in my own limiting of the unlimited, how can I extricate myself from it?”

“Yes I know, al-Ghazali himself, on the eve of his attaining the highest possible rank in the intellectual milieu of his time and taking over the reins of al-Nizammiyya, went out and threw all his books down a well and took to the road seeking real knowledge.

“But how can I, whose parents worked so hard to help put me through school and I, who worked so hard to follow their advice and spent days working and studying while the slackers were out playing, and now I am a doctor but I have come to know that my soul is desperately sick and all day people are coming to me seeking help but I understand that I cannot even help my self — that I am, in a sense, sicker than my sickest patient — at least as far as my own self is concerned; what can I do? I have a wife and children who are dependent on me. It’s all well and good to talk about al-Ghazali throwing his books down the well but how do *I* do that?”

Or, “Halfway through college I realised that what they were supposedly ‘teaching’ me was, in reality, just vocational training and I wasn’t really learning anything at all except a trade and I was a good Muslim and I became worried that I really didn’t even know my own *dīn* so, in spite of the objections of my parents who wanted me to become a doctor, lawyer, engineer, IT worker (take your pick) dropped those subjects and really began to study my *dīn* to the point where people — family, friends and others — began to come to me and ask this and that — be it “can I take a fifteen year fixed mortgage even though *riba* (ربا) is attached to it.” or “I married this guy but he turned out to be abusive and now I want to get out of my marriage because it’s no good for me and I have two kids now but how does a woman get a divorce in ‘Islām?” or “I see my brothers and sisters in Gaza living in a kind of hell on earth and I want to take action as a Muslim. What should I do?” and now I’m running counselling sessions and working with the youth in afterschool programs and doing all these things for the benefit of the community and I am able to answer many questions according to Hanafi fiqh but one day when I was reading Qur’ān and really thinking about things I came across these passages,

وَمَا أَرْسَلْنَاكَ إِلَّا رَحْمَةً لِّلْعَالَمِينَ

wa mā ‘arsalnāka ‘illā raḥmata li-l-‘ālamīn

And We have not sent you except as a mercy to all the worlds

(Sūrah al-‘Anbiyā‘ 21:107)

## Refining our Character

and

كَتَبَ رَبُّكُمْ عَلَى نَفْسِهِ الرَّحْمَةَ

kataba rabbukum ʿala nafsihi-r-rahmah

...your Lord has written Mercy upon Himself

(Sūrah al-ʿAnʿām 6:54)

and I realised that even though I really was being truly helpful to my fellow Muslims in so many ways, that I didn't really have that deep mercy in my heart but only knowledge in my brain, and I want to have that mercy, I want to have that real love. How do I get it?"

In a sense, as al-Ghazali says, "The similtude of the pulling away of the veils is that of a person who has made *wūḍūʿ* and is now ready to make their *ṣalāt*. Now he needs an *ʿimam* to lead him in his *ṣalāt*. That, al Ghazali says, "is the spiritual guide for without a spiriutal guide travelling the path will not be direct."

In the *tafsīr* of Ibn Kathīr, we find this ḥadīth of the Prophet ﷺ:

"Allāh has set an example: a straight path that is surrounded by two walls, one on each side, with several open doors within the walls covered with curtains. There is a caller on the gate of the path who calls out, 'O people! Stay on the path and do not deviate from it.' Meanwhile, a caller from above the path is also warning any person who wants to open any one of these doors, 'Woe unto you! Do not open it, for if you open it you will pass through.'

The straight path is ʿIslām, the two walls are the set limits of Allāh, and the doors represent what Allāh ﷻ has prohibited. The caller at the gate to the path is the Book of Allāh, while the caller above the path is the admonishment of Allāh in the heart of every Muslim."

al-Ghazali رحمه الله continues, "The Path to Allāh ﷻ is hidden and mixed with the paths of the Shayṭān. The Path to Allāh ﷻ is one. but there are a thousand paths to the false. How will it be possible to travel that [one] path withut a guide?"

Think deeply of what the Prophet ﷺ means when he says concerning the Straight Path:

“A straight path that is surrounded by two walls, one on each side, with several open doors within the walls covered with curtains...”

From behind each of these curtains a ṣhayṭān is calling, “Come in. Come in. I have just what you are looking for.”

So as al-Ghazali ﷺ says, “How will it be possible to travel the path without a guide?” When there is a ṣhayṭān behind every curtain calling on us to “Come in. Come in.” How do we know what door to go in and what door to leave shut? Which voice is true and which voice is the voice of the deceiver, the liar, the leader astray?

So again it is paramount to find a Guide, a ṣhaykh, a murshīd, a pīr, keeping in mind all that we have said concerning how to assess the *bona fides* of such a being and then, having put one’s hand in the hand of such a person — and that is a very scary thing for many people — you must put all your affairs in the hands of the one in whose hand you have placed your hand and set aside seeking to control the narrative or the outcome or it will never work.

One must know, as al-Ghazali ﷺ says, “that your profit [even] in the error of the Guide will be greater than your own correctness. Whatever you hear from the spiritual Guide that you do not understand should remind you of the story of Sayyidinā Mūsā ﷺ and Sayyidinā Khidr ﷺ. That story [that Allāh ﷻ relates in the Chapter of the Cave (Sūrah al-Kahf 18)] is for the spiritual Guide and his student, for the ṣhuyukh know things which the mind [of the student] cannot fathom or entertain.”

Once, before medicine was as advanced about the interior working of the body as it is now, a man went to the doctor for a pain in his right finger. The doctor treated it but there was no improvement.

He went to another doctor who applied an herb to the man’s left shoulder.

The patient said, “What kind of foolishness is this? My pain is in my hand and he is treating my shoulder. The pain is here and the medicine is there. What is the use of that?”

Well the finger got better.

The finger got better because that doctor knew that the problem was in the nerve and nerves spring from the brain and the spine and that which comes from the left goes to the right and that which comes from the right goes to the left.

The point of this is that the sincere student must first of all trust their Guide because the Guide knows more than you and, in the end, you have to give up control as your desire for control and insistence on doing things your way is what got you into trouble in the first place. You came to the Guide to put an end to your troubles. You went to him because you finally understood you didn't really know and what you did know was only getting you deeper into what you didn't know. So give up and give in.

This is a process, never really a product, that seems especially difficult in the present time particularly for those who have been taught by the so-called education system to "think".

Allāh ﷻ says,

وَلَا تَقْتُلُوا أَوْلَادَكُمْ خَشْيَةَ إِمْلَاقٍ ۖ نَحْنُ نَرْزُقُهُمْ وَإِيَّاكُمْ ؕ إِنَّ قَتْلَهُمْ كَانَ خِطْئًا كَبِيرًا

wa la taqtulū ʾawlādakum khashhyata ʾimlāq  
naḥnu narzuqhum wa ʾiyyakum  
ʾinna qatluhum kāna khīṭnan kabīrā

And do not murder your children for fear of want  
We provide for them and for you!  
Truly killing them is a grave sin.  
(Sūrah al Isrāʾ 17:31)

And by way of an aside regarding modern education or, more correctly, vocational training, we see today so many sincere mothers and fathers seeking worldly education for their children because they see no chance for their child's acquiring worldly riches through religious education. Many parents struggle to get their children admitted into schools out of fear of relative starvation and poverty. and esoterically they are killing them with their own hands.

Ostensibly they are acquiring an ‘education’ but actually they are being butchered, for what are these universities and colleges but mints of heresy and atheism and, as Faqīr Nūr Muḥammad ﷺ says, “The alloy of irreligiousness and immorality are mingled with the pure gold of conscience and *fiṭrah* and the seals of atheism and heresy are impressed on the clear tablets of human hearts and the coins are minted according to secular customs and values are fixed according to ‘jobs’ which are no less than forms of wage slavery. Alas, hundreds of Yusūfs ﷺ are sold for these counterfeit coins.

“The *kuffar*, which is say the hidens of truth, imagine the *dīn* to be the outcome of the dark ages while *now* is the age of enlightenment and science. The old religions and ancient methods of knowing the truth and refining the character befitted the old superstitious age and should perish with that age. Now the world is advanced. Old religions and ancient methods are incompetent and unable to affect the present civilised age and put it on the path to progress. Hence the need for new reformers and novel fashions. To urinate while standing, to emit smoke from one’s nose and mouth, to dance and whistle in mirthfulness and sport like monkeys and jump like frogs are the signs of civilization and indications of progress.”

So...so much for learning to think for your ‘self’.

Returning to the Guide and the need for the Guide in terms of the refining of character, perhaps we need to look at what character is.

The foremost source of all excellent character (*ʿuswatun ḥasanah*), first and last, is the Prophet ﷺ, of whom Allāh ﷻ says,

لَقَدْ كَانَ لَكُمْ فِي رَسُولِ اللَّهِ أُسْوَةٌ حَسَنَةٌ  
مَنْ كَانَ يَرْجُوا اللَّهَ وَالْيَوْمَ الْآخِرَ وَذَكَرَ اللَّهَ كَثِيرًا

laqdā kāna lakum fī rasūli-llāhi ʿuswatun ḥasanah  
liman kāna yarjū-llāha wa-l-yawma-l-ʾakḥira wa dhakara-llāh kathīrā

Truly in the Messenger of Allāh you have an excellent example  
for the one who hopes in the Final Day  
and who Remembers Allāh abundantly.

(Sūrah al-ʿAḥzab 33:21)

## Refining our Character

As we said at the very beginning of this talk, the source of all of which we are speaking is found in the first command of Allāh ﷻ:

اقْرَأْ بِاسْمِ رَبِّكَ الَّذِي خَلَقَ

°iqārā° bismi rabbika-l-ladhī khalaqa

Recite in the Name of your Lord who created [you].

(Sūrah al-°Alaq 96:1)

al-Ghazalī writes in the °Ihya, “The Prophet used to invoke and pray to the Almighty to grant him good manners (°adab) and good treatment (°akhlaq) in his affairs with the people. To adorn him with good character and conduct. He used to say in his du°ā° ‘Make my being and my conduct good.’ and ‘Oh Allāh save me from bad character and conduct.’ Proof of the acceptance of his du°ā° can be found in the responses of Allāh ﷻ.

أَجِيبْ دَعْوَةَ الدَّاعِ إِذَا دَعَانِ

°ujībū da°wata-d-da°i °idhā da°an

I answer the prayer of the one who calls.

(Sūrah al-Baqarah 2:186)

and

ادْعُونِي أَسْتَجِبْ لَكُمْ

°ud°ūnī °astajib lakum

Call upon Me – I answer you!

(Sūrah al-Ghāfir 40:60)

“Allāh ﷻ revealed the Qur°ān on him and through him. Allāh ﷻ taught him good manners. His ﷺ character is the Qur°ān. Sa°ad ؓ reported, I went to °Ā°ishā and her father ؓ and asked them about the character and conduct of the Prophet ﷺ, to which °Ā°ishā ؓ replied, ‘Don’t you recite the Qur°ān?’ I replied, ‘Yes.’ She told me, ‘The character of the Messenger ﷺ is the Qur°ān.’”

He gives grace to follow the Qur°ān to whom He chooses to make his character and conduct beautiful. She ؓ said, “His character and his conduct is expressed in the following verse of the Qur°ān:”

إِنَّ اللَّهَ يَأْمُرُ بِالْعَدْلِ وَالْإِحْسَانِ وَإِيتَاءِ ذِي الْقُرْبَىٰ  
وَيَنْهَىٰ عَنِ الْفَحْشَاءِ وَالْمُنْكَرِ وَالْبَغْيِ  
يَعِظُكُمْ لَعَلَّكُمْ تَذَكَّرُونَ

°inna-llāha ya°murū bi-l-°adli wa-l-°ihsāni wa °itā°i dhi-l-qurbā  
wa yanāhaya °ani-l-faḥṣhā°i wa-l-muñkari wa-l-baghī;  
ya°iḍḥukum la°allakum tadḥakkarūn.

Surely Allāh enjoins justice and kindness  
and generosity to those near [you] and He forbids all that is shameful,  
and that which is wrong and [all] filthy acts.

He admonishes you in order that you may Remember the Truth.

(Sūrah an-Nahl 16:90)

Allāh ﷻ says, “Pardon them and forgive them.” Allāh loves “the doers of good.” Allāh ﷻ asks, “Wouldn’t you like that Allāh forgives you?” Allāh ﷻ says, “Remove evil with what is good and as a result the enmity that exists between you and your enemy will be removed and he will become your friend.” Allāh ﷻ says, “Give up conjecture as in most cases it is sinful.” Allāh ﷻ says, “Don’t spy and back bite one another.” Allāh ﷻ says, “Have patience when disasters befall you.” Allāh ﷻ says, “It is difficult to have patience and forgive.”

In the battle of Uhud when the Prophet ﷺ was wounded Allāh ﷻ revealed the following verse:

أَمْ حَسِبْتُمْ أَنْ تُدْخَلُوا الْجَنَّةَ وَلَمَّا يَعْلَمِ اللَّهُ  
الَّذِينَ جَاهَدُوا مِنْكُمْ وَيَعْلَمِ الصَّابِرِينَ

°am ḥasibātum °āñ tadākḥulu-l-jannata wa lamā ya°alami-llāhu  
-l-ladḥīna jāhadū minḥum wa ya°lama-ṣ-ṣābirīn

Did you think that you could enter the Garden, and Allāh not know  
who [among you] struggled [in the Way] and who was patient?

(Sūrah °Al °Imrān 3:142)



This was for teaching him the virtue of patience in adversity and thus to improve both his character and conduct, and for this reason, among others, the Prophet ﷺ said,

“I have been sent to complete your characters  
and teach you good conduct.”

Allāh ﷻ praised the character of the Prophet ﷺ, saying,

وَإِنَّكَ لَعَلَىٰ خُلُقٍ عَظِيمٍ

wa ʾinnaka laʿalaya khuluqin ʿaḍhīm

“and surely We have created you on a noble form.”

(Sūrah al-Qalam 68:4)

About himself the Prophet ﷺ said,

“Allah has sent me as an apostle

so that I may demonstrate perfection of character,  
refinement of manners and loftiness of deportment.”

(Malik in *al-Muwatta*; Aḥmad in his *Musnad*; and in the *Mishkāt*)

He ﷺ also said, “Allāh ﷻ adorned ʾIslām with good character and beautiful actions. Good company, good manners, modest talk, doing good to others, feeding the people, spreading peace, visiting the ill, following the beir of the dead, treating the neighbor with goodness be he a believer or a non-believer, forgiving and pardoning the faults of others, showing honor to a Muslim, accepting the invitation of the poor or the rich, settling disputes among the people, giving charity, being the first to greet, forswearing miserliness and greed, giving up bad conduct, pride, the seeking of glory, haughtiness, indecencies, hatred, rebellion, emnity, oppression; giving up these are the attributes of the believer; the character of a Muslim.”

He himself used to repair his own shoes, join his wives in their work and cut meat with them. He was shy and did not stare at anyone for long. He accepted the invitation of slaves and free men and the gift of even the leg of a rabbit. He visited the sick and the diseased and attended funerals and went to weddings. He was the most modest of men without any pride and his tongue was eloquent without being long winded.

## Refining our Character

All of this gives us some idea of what is meant by a refined character; of what any one of us is working towards in our effort to refine our own characters.

Again, all of this is without meaning unless somehow we obtain the means, and to reiterate, these means can be found in the hands of those who have found it in the hands of the one who is at the end of all the lines, at the base of every tree (*shajarah*) and line (*silsilah*) some of whose ﷺ qualities we have sought to delineate.

As ‘ibn ‘Arabī رحمه الله said, “Look upon the whole creation, and above all, mankind, with good will – accepting, approving, forgiving, serving, loving. Make that your nature in your dealings with the world. Listen to your conscience. Cleanse your heart. In that clean heart, keep up prayer for your faithful brothers. Help and serve, as much as you can, the people who hide their misery, who are content with their poverty, the travelers on the path to truth. Do not attribute to yourself virtue, goodness, and graciousness because of your service to the creation. Consider that you owe other people thanks for having humbly accepted your help. It is incumbent upon you to lighten the load of those who are burdened. If people whose pain you have helped to alleviate cause you pain in return – if their responses, their ways, their habits are dark and cast shadows upon you – show patience and forbearance. Do not forget that Allāh says:

يَا أَيُّهَا الَّذِينَ آمَنُوا اسْتَعِينُوا بِالصَّبْرِ وَالصَّلَاةِ  
إِنَّ اللَّهَ مَعَ الصَّابِرِينَ

yā ayyuha-l-ladhīna ‘amanū-s-ta‘īnū bi -ṣ-ṣabri wa-ṣ-ṣalāh  
‘inna-llāha ma‘a-ṣ-ṣābirīn

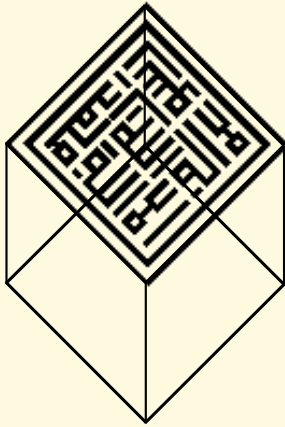
“Oh you who believe, seek help in steadfast patience and in ṣalah.  
Truly Allāh is with the patient.”

(Sūrah al-Baqara 2:153)

“Therefore, when you are free (from what is in front of you), still progress (towards a higher station), and make your Lord your exclusive goal.” (Sūrah al-Ḥajj 22:78)

— wa-llahu ‘alim — Green Mountain, Virginia, — 1 Rajab 1431





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